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Headquarters
HGG-A-654

Mr. Esterline

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Col King

JAN 20 1954

Lincoln

Chief of Station, Guatemala

PBSUCCESS

Memorandum of Conversation -- Opposition to Arbenz Regime

1. Enclosed are copies of a memorandum of conversation prepared by an Embassy officer on 18 January 1954.
2. It is believed this memorandum may be of interest to PBSuccess personnel in view of the remarks relating to Miguel IDIGORAS Fuentes, Carlos CASTILLO Armas and other personalities. The memorandum also contains interesting comments regarding the military capacity of the Guatemalan Army and possible reaction of communists to any attempted coup.

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL

2003

George L. Tranger

Enclosure: as noted

18 January 1954

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The Ambassador
FROM: W. L. Krieg
SUBJECT: Organized Opposition to Arbenz Regime

DATE: January 18, 195

A few days ago I had a lengthy conversation with a young, well-educated Guatemalan who has been in the opposition to the present Government for some time. I regard him as well-informed and generally sound in judgment. The following paragraphs contain the essential parts of the talk but not necessarily in the order in which they came up.

Leadership of the Opposition

My Guatemalan caller said that in his opinion there was only one person who could head an effective revolt and the ensuing Government: Colonel Carlos CASTILLO Armas. I inquired about Castillo's background, and he explained that Castillo had been a schoolteacher as well as an Army officer, that he had had a very hard life in the time of UBICO and had been a part of the revolutionary movement of 1944. He was a man of moderate views, neither extremely conservative nor extremely liberal. He had an open mind and could accept advice.

In contrast, General Miguel YDIGORAS Fuentes was a caudillo of the old school. He had served in various posts under Ubico and had distinguished himself for his harshness. My caller said he had talked with fifty or more Army officers of his acquaintance to sound out their views on a possible move to overthrow Arbenz. With few exceptions, he said, their reaction was that they would resist any effort by Ydigoras but would be neutral if the movement were headed by Castillo Armas. For this reason, he believed that a revolt headed by Ydigoras would be doomed to failure.

He said that most members of the group would have preferred a civilian to head the new Government and stated that the Ubico regime had left a strong prejudice against military Government among the Guatemalan people. In this connection he questioned that AREVALO would have chosen Arbenz as his successor if he had been

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able to choose freely. He implied that most members of his group regarded Lic. Juan CORDOVA Cerna as the most capable civilian; but they all recognized that in present circumstances, the leader must be a military figure.

Military Capacity of the Guatemalan Army

My caller said that certain U.S. measures had incidentally proved helpful to his cause: the most important step in this connection had been the refusal to license arms sales to the Guatemalan Army. While he recognized the general correctness of this policy, he said that it had proved disadvantageous in one respect only: the Army was now so poorly armed that officers friendly to his movement were not sure the Army (or specifically the Guardia de Honor) could control the police (Guardia Civil) if the latter remained loyal to Arbenz. He said the Guardia Civil had about 1600 trained men in Guatemala City and a fair supply of machine guns and ammunition. He thought these policemen might be more than a match for the "little Indian soldiers." (N.B. I do not think this is a generally held view.)

I asked whether the fact that the soldiers were Indians did not mean they were more likely to follow their officers whereas the police would be more likely to "lie low" to see which way the tide was moving. He replied that many officers doubted their men would move against the Government if ordered to by their officers, that the Government had conducted an intensive course of indoctrination for the soldiers and that large numbers of them were believed to feel a strong sense of loyalty to Colonel Arbenz. This doubt about the reaction of the troops was causing considerable hesitation among the officers who were otherwise well-disposed towards an anti-Government coup.

Possible Reaction of Communists to Attempted Coup

My visitor's concern regarding the military capacity of the Army was enhanced by his conviction that the Communists were undoubtedly prepared to give the Government vigorous and effective support against any attempt to overthrow it. In his opinion the recent invasions of private farms not subject to the Agrarian Reform Law in the Escuintla area was designed primarily to build up militant groups who would have a real stake in the continuance of the present regime. He said Carlos Manuel PELLEGER, the Communist leader, had openly said that in case of a revolt he would bring his boys to Guatemala

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City and "clean out the reactionaries." My caller did not doubt that Pellecer and other Communists could muster thousands of men in defense of the regime and that the results could be distinctly bloody. Despite this circumstance, he said he saw no alternative to an invasion from across the borders since he did not think the Opposition could muster sufficient strength in the Capital to execute a quick coup d'etat. I thought it inadvisable to pursue this subject any further.

WLKrieg:rd

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